

Scaling the sheer heights of success

Organisations large and small are negotiating similar territory to achieve great things – but some big firms are adapting better than others

It's reassuring to know that the things preoccupying the FTSE 100's top chief executives aren't too dissimilar to those leading Britain's best SMEs – there's just the small matter of scale to consider.

Just as SMEs are using the web and an ecosystem of partners to punch above their weight, big companies are developing systems and culture to become more agile. Sage, one of 10 finalists for this year's QBE FTSE 100 Business of the Year, is a case in point. Sage's CMO, Amanda Johnson, former global vice-president of partner marketing for Cisco, says: "Simply joining the company, what has impressed me most about Sage – the only software company in the FTSE 100 – is its agility and the speed of its transformation to leverage the power of the cloud to better support and enable its six million customers."

While market share, sales growth and shareholder value are all top of the agenda for the 10 industry leaders shortlisted, so are innovation, customer service, talent and sustainability – and they have the recognition to prove it. Many have won national and industry specific awards – from Hammerson, Property Week's Property Company of the Year, to the Retail Industry Awards' Supermarket of the Year, Sainsbury's.

Recognised market leaders in their respective industries, these exemplars have achieved exceptional growth and resilience while adapting to a range of economic challenges, domestic and global.

Sir Martin Sorrell leads the £10bn global marketing communications giant WPP, named Holding Company of the Year for the third year running at the 2013 Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity, and World's Most Effective Holding Company for the second year running by the Effie Index 2013. Having delivered consistent and impressive growth, despite a biting recession and the Google revolution, he attributes this success to a clear and consistent strategy, a culture of entrepreneurialism and investment in attracting and training talent through schemes like the group's Fellowship graduate programme, which comprises three one-year rotations through WPP companies. Sir Martin says: "We have a number of different companies within the group, each a distinct brand with its own identity and culture – that's a big part of our strength and it helps us attract the best people. A key part of our strategy is what we call 'horizontality', which means getting our people to work together more and more effectively for the benefit of our clients. One example of that is our innovative 'Team' model, which allows clients to access the best talent from across our various operating companies."

Talent is also high on the agenda for fellow finalist Centrica – the £24bn energy company. The largest single trainer and employer of domestic gas engineers in Britain (with 1,000 agencies currently in training), Centrica was once again recognised in a Times Top 100 Graduate Employer in 2012. Chief executive Sam



The finalists

The QBE FTSE 100 Business of the Year

- Centrica
- Compass Group
- Experian
- Hammerson
- SAB Miller
- Sage plc
- Sainsbury's
- Smith & Nephew
- Whitbread
- WPP Group

Laidlaw says: "In terms of fostering the environment for our people to achieve, we have broad programmes such as Extraordinary You in British Gas, whereby every engineer undergoes a personal development-focused inspirational leadership course. We also have specific initiatives such as the Centrica Women's Network, which inspires our people by drawing on the example of the third of our non-executive directors who are female, and other initiatives such as sending a brave group on a team-building trip to the Arctic next March."

Diversity in its broadest sense has been embraced by organisations like Whitbread which, like Centrica, employs more than 40,000 people. The UK's biggest hospitality company, which owns the popular Premier Inn and Costa coffee brands, reached 10th place in the Sunday Times Top Companies to Work For in 2013 and won the Diversity in Employment award at last year's Springboard Awards for Excellence. "The great thing about this business is that anyone entering at any level has the same opportunity to rise to the top, regardless of whether they went to university," says chief executive Andy Harrison. "Social mobility and ethnicity are important areas of diversity for Whitbread because this reflects the diversity of our customer base." Having created more than 6,000 new UK jobs, Whitbread has set itself a target of half of all new jobs going to the young and long-term unemployed.

Following the "Shareholder Spring", this year's finalists tell the story behind the value they are creating beyond profit. Social and environmental impact has risen up the board agenda – for example, global information company Experian uses its skills to help local communities in projects with Big Issue Invest, gaining insights into social housing while helping those denied it. Aligning company values with commercial objectives, this is proving the business case for corporate citizenship. Part of a more embedded and holistic strategy for sustained growth, encompassing a range of metrics, this is reassuring shareholders about the corporate longevity of these organisations. And the results speak for themselves – with many of this year's finalists delivering multiples of the FTSE's average total return to shareholders and impressive dividends in the face of the global economic downturn.

"Today's challenging economic environment has certainly served as an impetus for businesses to evaluate how they operate and adapt where necessary, something which was very real for all of the QBE FTSE 100 Business of the Year finalists," says Matthew Crane, UK & Ireland managing director for QBE. "As a business insurance specialist, QBE plays an integral part in underpinning the long-term success of our clients, supporting them as they address the varied challenges of their industries but more critically enabling them to embrace the opportunities that are arising amid today's ever-changing marketplaces."

Contenders: Sainsbury's, Sage plc and Whitbread have all made the shortlist

Judgment beyond numbers

This competition pits the smallest against the biggest

The appetite for peer recognition has grown as organisations seek new ways to attract talent, investment, new business and media interest. An awards industry has grown around this demand, with accolades for every conceivable aspect of business, but the potency and relevance of awards varies considerably.

From its launch in 2002, the National Business Awards has sought to establish itself as Britain's most prestigious and credible benchmark – engaging organisations of all sizes from all sectors. While the combined global turnover of the 150 finalists for 2013 is more than £341bn, it ranges from £30,000 to £1bn, and from start-ups and SMEs to the FTSE 100.

"There really is no other competition on a national scale that pits the small entrepreneur against the multinational corporate," says Rob Hawthorn, managing director, client service, at Barclays Corporate – a former winner and now long-standing judge of the National Business Awards.

"Where else do we find ourselves in a situation where each has an equal opportunity of winning, and where winning means so much to both parties?"

While the diversity of those participating in the National Business Awards is what sets it apart, it has had to develop a robust and transparent judging process to ensure any organisation can win. This has been achieved through seven core criteria that apply to all award categories – including leadership, growth, staff engagement, customer focus, ethics, innovation and financial performance.

A three-stage judging process is supported by a multi-disciplinary panel of 100 judges who apply a range of complementary perspectives. "Most award panels are built of industry vertical specialists so it was a

real pleasure to be surrounded by professionals from all walks of enterprise and private businesses, so that the thoughts and feedback delivered was varied and broad," observes Innovation Award judge James Stuckland, executive director, office of the CIO, technology business development at JP Morgan Chase. "It's the first event I have been involved in that took such care to ensure the selected panel for each event had been screened to deliver the best candidates."

The National Business Awards is a high-profile campaign for celebrating enterprise excellence, inspiring the wider business community by profiling finalists through more than 30 media and strategic partners including the Daily Telegraph and Sky News. The year-long campaign, which will reach 14m professionals in 2013, is a reminder of the value of going one step beyond.

"The hunger to be the best is the most potent fuel for continuous improvement," says Chris Robinson, managing director of Boost

Marketing, who believes that the awards ceremony should mark the beginning of the campaign, not just its culmination. "When awards provide feedback not only on the quality of your entry but how your business compares to its peers then you have an extremely valuable insight that you can choose to ignore at your peril."

"Our recent research showed that only 15pc of awards provide feedback to all entrants automatically, and of those 15pc it is the National Business Awards that in our view sets the standard here. Their feedback is so comprehensive, based on such clear scoring and delivered by such credible judges, that it means everyone who enters is a winner."

An advisory board of

It's valuable insight that you ignore at your peril

industry leaders and influencers ensures the National Business Awards remains relevant. Board members – including former president of the CBI, Sir Roger Carr, digital champion Martha Lane Fox, and Technology Strategy Board chairman and Cisco UK & Ireland chief executive Phil Smith – advise on the development of the award programme.

"Being able to compare UK digital entrepreneurship with that in the US has been fascinating," says advisory board member and judge Alyson Stewart-Allen, director of International Marketing Partners. "It's great to be able to provide an international perspective to the National Business Awards but it's also edifying to see those helping the UK to lead e-commerce in Europe."

So, thanks are due to all those supporting the awards, including 100 judges, 12 advisory board members, 30 media and strategic partners, 10 sponsors and official partners and the alumni of 1,000 organisations and individuals recognised over the past 12 years. AE



Decision-makers: a shortlist panel meets each year to review the judging process

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